

A View of Edison

Edison. The Man Who Made the Future. RONALD W. CLARK. Putnam, New York, 1977. 256 pp., illus. \$12.95.

Ronald W. Clark, an English ex-journalist, has for a number of years given himself over to writing scientific biographies for the general public, most notably a 1971 biography of Einstein. The book considered here is not comparable to that earlier one in either bulk or quality. Yet for the time being it may claim a useful though modest place in the Edison literature.

Its shortcomings are several and substantial. For a reviewer, one of them is the lack, at least in this first American

edition, of an introduction explaining the book's occasion and purpose. Obviously, in quotability, abundance of dramatic experiences, picturesqueness of character, and recognition by the general public Thomas Alva Edison approaches Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain as a sure-fire subject for popular biography. That fact and the 1977 centennial of the phonograph may explain Clark's choice and timing. But Clark's book does not come near superseding Matthew Josephson's 1959 *Edison* (still available in paperback) as the fullest, soundest, and most absorbing modern biography for the layman; and given Clark's proven expertise as a biographer we may suppose that it was not meant to.

Clark's practiced hand does not entirely conceal evidence of haste. Though as a former journalist Clark doubtless writes with speed as well as fluency, this book contains a few jarring usages, some of them Anglicisms perhaps, but others obviously solecisms. More fundamental evidence is the fact that, in sharp contrast to his *Einstein*, Clark's *Edison* rests entirely on a dozen or so newspapers and journals and fewer than 80 books, many of them peripheral, superficial, or unreliable. He does not use (though Josephson did) the rich manuscript sources available for more than 20 years at the Edison Laboratory National Monument in West Orange, New Jersey, an omission especially lamentable in the case of a subject so thickly festooned with apocryphal anecdotes, often blithely embroidered by Edison himself. Presumably Clark made do with such material as came readily to hand in England. Moreover Clark is occasionally imprecise or downright sloppy in his use of his limited sources.

What, then, is left to recommend this book? As the work of an Englishman, leaning heavily on English sources, it has a point of view subtly different from that of American treatments and so to that degree augments one's perceptions of Edison. The reader catches glimpses of Edison through the eyes of English rivals such as Joseph Swan in electric light and William Friese-Greene in motion pictures (though Clark freely concedes the weakness of their claims). Edison's English involvements, English reactions to and use of his inventions, and English parallels and contrasts all are more strongly emphasized than in Josephson's account. More generally, some readers may find it advantageous that Clark's version is only half as long as Josephson's. It achieves this brevity not only by skillful compression but also by pruning away much of the human interest,

historical background, and technological fullness that abound in Josephson, as well as by scanting Edison's later work, such as the storage-battery quest. But it does give the reader a succinct, lucid, readable, and generally judicious though not especially original account of Edison's best-known work, along with enough of the man to suggest his character and personality. In this stripped-down model, moreover, the shape of Edison's career—his role as an "improver" of others' ideas (pp. 73–74), for example, or the flagging of his inventive genius after the early 1880's (pp. 149–50)—stands out more clearly.

In short, the scholarly reader must wait (presumably for Thomas Hughes's work now in progress) and the general reader who has the time should still turn to Josephson, but the casual or hurried reader might reasonably try Clark. Very likely this is all Clark intended.

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